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Iran: In the Historical Middle

"The focal point of the aspirations of the Soviet Union," Stalin's foreign minister, V. M. Molotov, secretly told the Germans during the 1939-41 Hitler-Stalin Pact, "is south of Batum and Baku and in the general direction of the Persian Gulf."

The area that Molotov was describing encompasses eastern Turkey, Iraq and Iran. The post-war history of Soviet diplomacy—and military power plays—demonstrates that Molotov knew what he was talking about, and what Stalin wanted.

Any understanding of what is happening in Iran today, including the Khomeini regime's grievances against the United States, must begin with the historical record. For it is a record full of instances involving the worldwide Soviet-American rivalry and confrontation that has dominated the decades since the end of World War II. Stalin is long since dead, but there is no reason to believe that Soviet "aspirations" have undergone any fundamental change in that part of the world.

The counter-aspiration of the United States was to deny Iran to the Soviet Union. This aspiration was based on geopolitical considerations; that Iran had oil was simply an incremental consideration, not the primary one.

But the Soviet-American conflict over Iran did not surface in the years of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. And that era was followed by a period of wartime cooperation. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union and the United States entered World War II, both in 1941, Moscow and Washington became allies, though often uncomfortable, against Hitler.

To send aid to embattled Russia, first Britain and then the United States had only two major routes, via the dangerous sea route north to Murmansk or via Iran. Back in 1907 a convention between imperial Britain and czarist Russia had made northern Iran a Russian sphere of influence and southern Iran a British sphere. During World War II, in the summer before American entry, Russia and Britain again sent troops into Iran, dividing it into similar spheres with Tehran under joint protection of the two nations. The United States later joined with Britain in its sphere of influence, and much American food and war materiel flowed through Iran to aid Stalin's armies and people.

A second consideration in the Anglo-Russian occupation of Iran was the belief that the shah was pro-Nazi; he was forced to abdicate and his son, the man at the center of today's controversy, came to the throne. In 1943, when Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt met in Tehran for a critical conference on war and post-war problems, Iran played no part.

At World War II's end, Russia, America and Britain were obligated to withdraw their troops, and the Western allies complied in early 1946. But the Soviets delayed, meanwhile aiding and abetting creation in late 1945 of an Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, under leadership of an Iranian who had been involved in a short-lived communist-sponsored state in the same area after World War I. This, of course, is the same Azerbaijan that today has been demanding, under one ayatollah's leadership, autonomy from the Khomeini regime in Tehran.

It should be noted here, too, that Moscow put a great deal of pressure on Turkey, Stalin even asking for cession of former czarist districts in Eastern Turkey that are "south of Batum," in Molotov's phrase. Moscow's opportunities in Iraq, between Turkey and Iran, centered on the rebellious Kurds. At war's end Moscow supported a Kurdish People's Republic in Iran in which Iraqi Kurds and Kurdish communists joined in a short-lived united front. Iraq, too, is "south of Batum and Baku and in the general direction of the Persian Gulf."

The Soviet efforts at expansionism to the south included negotiation with a compliant Iranian prime minister for a Soviet-Iranian oil exploitation concern, 51 percent to be owned by Moscow. Stalin talked to the American ambassador of Russia's need for Iranian oil, but President Truman served Stalin with a virtual ultimatum to get out of Iran. Iran's oil also was on the American government's mind, but it seems to me a misplaced emphasis to state, as Daniel Yergin does in his book "Shattered Peace," that oil was "very much at the heart of the Iranian crisis...." He is, however, correct in concluding that the crisis of March 1946 was "a landmark in the development of the Cold War."